BLACKAMERICAN AESTHETICS: A MARXIST ASSESSMENT

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BY

JACOB ESKELUND

DEPARTMENT OF AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

A Marxist approach to the subject of Blackamerican aesthetics should not be undertaken without the acute awareness on the part of the investigator that he is virtually stepping into a political and racial minefield. Certain aesthetic theories have been deliberately constructed with a number of pitfalls into which it has been hoped that blue-eyed (in the literal as well as the figurative sense of the word) trespassers would fall. White Americans, let alone white Europeans--which in the present case assumes actuality --have not had an easy job coming to terms with the ideas and sentiments of the black aesthetic tradition. But for a white and Marxist investigator a large number of specific dangers should become particularly evident.

Such dangers stem from the actual historical record of interrelations between blacks and Marxists in the U.S.A., and from the peculiar fate of Marxist thinking in the U.S.A. in general.

To take the latter first: the social and political development of the U.S.A., its highly individualistic and competitive capitalist system, has rendered the concept of communism practically anathema in American political thought.

Even before, but most markedly after the witch-hunts of McCarthyism in the 1950s, all Marxist endeavors have been surrounded with a certain amount of suspicion from the Establishment as well as from the man in the street. This suspicion has penetrated the scholarly circles, universities, colleges, and the general cultural milieu to such an extent that when compared to the situation in Western Europe, where Marxism has by no means had an easy time, it seems almost unbelievable that some American scholars have had the stamina to withstand the pressure from their antagonistic surroundings. These exceptional cases notwithstanding, the scholarly tradition of the U.S.A., by European standards, is peculiarly exempt from Marxist influences.

Any attempt to apply a Marxist method must therefore equip itself with a strong defense against this peculiar anti-Marxist prejudice of the American scholarly milieu. Examples of such an attitude abound in the scholarly journals of the U.S.A. I have chosen the following example as it gives a good impression of this general anti-Marxist attitude, and leads on to my next subject, namely, the strained relationship between Blackamericans and Marxists, especially white Marxists.

> It was common knowledge years before he died that W. E. B. DuBois had chosen Herbert Aptheker...to edit his correspondence and other papers recently published....There were those Negro intellectuals --and especially the professional academicians and the politically oriented observers among them--who objected to Dr. DuBois' choice on one or the other of two grounds, and sometimes on both. Herbert

> Aptheker was white, and editing the correspondence of a black American of Dr. DuBois' stature and international prominence was a job for a Negro American, they said. What could a white man know about living as a black man in America? How could a white man be expected to understand and respond sympathetically to the Negro American experience? Other--and sometimes the same dissenters--pointed out that Mr. Aptheker was an avowed Marxist, and for Dr. DuBois to choose someone of that "political persuasion" to edit his papers gave substance to the allegation (bruited about by McCarthy's gang) that he, DuBois, was himself a Communist: an "enemy of the State" and of the American way of life. And, the dissenters said, if their best-known, longest-recognized leader was Communist, where did that leave them?[1]

The historical record of contacts between blacks and Marxists in the U.S.A. is anything but encouraging. The history of labor union sanctioned ditchings of black workers is long and well documented; and so are the blunders performed by the American Communist Party (CPA), which at times cry to heaven for lack of insight into the basic social conditions of the black population of the U.S.A.[2]

It is hardly a coincidence that two extremely important and influential black novels, Richard Wright's Native Son and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, treat this subject rather extensively, and both conclude that the white Communists, their alleged solidarity with the blacks notwithstanding, are nothing but wolves in sheep's clothing.[3]

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[1]Jay Saunders Redding, "The Correspondence of W. E. B. DuBois: a Review Article," Phylon, June, 1979, p. 119.

[2]See for instance, Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker (New York: International Publishers, 1976).

[3]See Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975) and Richard Wright, Native Son (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

More recently John Henrik Clarke was more explicit in making a warning against Marxism:

> There are a number of black nationalists now and others who are in a quandary about the nature of political commitment. They argue Marx and Lenin because this is available, and I am not against Marx or Lenin. Karl Marx had some interesting things to say about the Europe of his day. But he wasn't talking about us at all. Very often we hear people say liberty and justice for all and we run to where the all is being given out only to discover that nobody was talking about us. Karl Marx wasn't talking about you.[4]

Now, on the basis of the historical record of black and Marxist interrelations in the U.S.A. I can do nothing but support these sceptical remarks of John H. Clarke. However, I must make a clear distinction between the original Marxist ideas on the one hand and the application of these same ideas on the other.

Labor unions in the U.S.A., and I am referring primarily to the A.F.L., have ardently fought the influence of self-avowed Marxists--so, in fact, I need not "make excuses" for their distortion of the Marxist doctrines; they have hardly attempted to use them. There are no excuses, however, for the CPA. Its members rightly are to blame for having misused Marxism to propagate their own (white) interests in the multi-racial and multi-cultural reality of the U.S.A.

Marxism, properly updated and adjusted to the peculiarities of the social reality of the U.S.A., I believe, is the best alternative to the mainstream liberalist creed. In

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[4]J. H. Clarke, "Beyond Pan-Africanism: an African World Union," in Black Books Bulletin, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall, 1974, p. 16.

passing I should mention that John H. Clarke himself, even though he denounces certain aspects of Marxism, may have come pretty close at formulating precisely such a "Marxism redefined."[5]

The precautions that one should take when employing a Marxist method on some Blackamerican matter may then be summed up as follows: to what extent is the subject under investigation saturated with the traditional American anti-Marxist attitude; and second, to what extent is it marked by the specifically black suspicion of Marxism. And, of course, since exponents of Marxism in the U.S.A. have, historically, been whites, there hovers above all this the ever present and well-founded suspicion on the part of Blackamerica towards anything white.

In the present investigation in the field of aesthetics such precautions are imperatives. More so because of the paradox that the ideas advanced by certain black aestheticians, notably in the 1960s, are heavily influenced by Marxist doctrines. Or should I say, they seem to be bearing on theoretical constructions which have an extraordinary similarity with Marxist aesthetics? For often Marxist theories are not accredited as the source. The reason that such a relationship is usually suppressed should appear from the above analysis. (As we shall see, there are exceptions to this rule.)

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[5]Ibid.

This is not meant to say that certain black aestheticians have done nothing but copied original Marxist thinking; rather, it is meant to say that they have, consciously or not, made original contributions to the increasingly international and interracial Marxist school of thinking.

On this background it has been of special interest to me to try to compare a Marxist aesthetic tradition, which has its roots almost exclusively in Europe, and thus distinguishes itself by not being contaminated by the racism and ethnocentricity which drench the American tradition, with the Blackamerican tradition of the 20th century, which was crowned by the so-called "Black Aesthetic" of the 1960s.[6]

I hope such a comparison will uncover some interesting aspects of both traditions and throw some light on the whole area of the science of aesthetics.

The aesthetic theories of the black scholars are characterized by being the products of an ongoing cultural battle, a battle between a white and a black culture. They consequently bear the mark of rhetoric and excitement to a considerable degree. The European tradition also comes out of an ongoing cultural battle, a battle between a liberal/bourgeois and a socialist/proletarian culture. And it is as

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[6]The Black Aesthetic denotes the highly articulate and popular aesthetic doctrines and manifestos which came out of the Black Arts Movement and Black Consciousness Movement of the black cultural revolution of the 1960s. The term "the Black Aesthetic" was coined in the mid-60s by Hoyt W. Fuller. (Fuller certified this in a personal conversation in Atlanta, April 11, 1979.)

combative as the Blackamerican tradition.

But although race and class in the Western capitalist countries have certain features in common they are by no means equivalents. And when it comes to an aesthetic analysis one had better overlook these superficial parallels as they are very likely to mislead the investigator. A bridging of the two aesthetic traditions must therefore be undertaken with the utmost care and caution. However, if one succeeds in satisfying these intricate and subtle requirements there should be a good possibility that the result will be fruitful, in the sense that it will open new doors to a better and more complete understanding of what aesthetic and cultural analyses are, or rather, should be all about. For in the end it is a question of freeing man from the economic and cultural shackles which bind him. Aesthetic and cultural analysis should open the eyes of men so that they can see how to free themselves. And on this level there are no differences in the responsibility of a Blackamerican and a European aesthetician (not to mention a white American one).

> For the world of human freedom cannot be built by the established societies, no matter how much they may streamline and rationalize their dominion. Their class structure, and the perfected controls required to sustain it, generate needs, satisfactions, and values which reproduce the servitude of the human existence. This "voluntary" servitude (voluntary inasmuch as it is introjected into the individuals), which justifies the benevolent masters, can be broken only through a political practice which reaches the roots of containment and contentment in the infrastructure of man, a political practice of methodical disengagement from and refusal of the Establishment, aiming at a radical

transvaluation of values. Such a practice involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a nonaggressive, nonexploitative world. (my underlining)[7]

[7]Herbert Marcuse, An Essay on Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 6.

CHAPTER I

THE EUROPEAN MARXIST AESTHETIC TRADITION

The European Marxist aesthetic tradition has had a long and varied history: from the inception of the basic ideas originating from the clash between Karl Marx and classical German philosophy in the middle of the 19th century to the present day where Marxism forms the ideological and political basis of several states, not only in Europe, but throughout the world. It would, of course, lead too far to try to delineate all the components and elements of this century old tradition. I shall here try to limit myself to an outline which has immediate relevance to the development of aesthetic theories which have had a lasting influence.

My outline appears as an isolated discussion of the development of ideas. Without the realization on the part of the reader that these ideas come out of specific social and historical relations it cannot have any validity. It has, however, been impossible for me to include a materialistic analysis of the development of the Marxist aesthetic. Suffice it here to say that notably the Russian Revolution and the Great Depression of the 30s have had an immense influence on this development.

My inability to comply with the requirements of a dialectic approach does not necessarily lead to a total invalidity of the present argument; I am here preoccupied with a predominantly internal criticism and comparison of aesthetic theories in which an ideological approach must assume first priority. This, on the other hand, does not mean that I do not believe that, in the last analysis, the real determining factors in the development of 1) the European Marxist aesthetic and 2) the Blackamerican aesthetic are the social, economic, and historical realities of the Old and the New Worlds respectively.

The peculiar position of Marxist dialectical materialism is that it must fight both idealistic and materialistic conceptions of the world. It cannot accept the idealism which says that ideas are the determining factors in human social life; and it cannot accept the materialism which claims that man is but the product of his material surroundings.

The fight which dialectical materialism has had to make against idealism may seem to have been the most important--and, indeed, the two philosophical stances have engaged in innumerable battles. However, the doctrines of a vulgar version of dialectical materialism may have been the most damaging and, I think, the most exhausting to fight. Within the realm of aesthetics this may very well hold true. To this problem I shall return presently.

Whereas it is true that Marxists must fight their

idealistic predecessors and contemporaries they must also frequently pay homage to some of their discoveries. Dialectical materialism must, on the whole, reject the extreme subjective idealism of Kant which says that the aesthetic judgment is an interior (subjective) settlement of the reasoning faculties of the individual himself. But it need not reject all the content of this statement. Kant's profound understanding of the active role of the human consciousness in its perception of the outside world can be rediscovered in Marxism at various points--although often placed in a different context from that of Kant's. Kant's epistemological discoveries have influenced, practically speaking, all subsequent philosophical systems, including Marxism.

Marxism must also reject certain aspects of Hegel's dialectical idealism which allows for a fundamental interrelation (dialectic) of subject and object, man and the material world, but establishes the spirit (Geist) as the motivating force in the development of human societies. Marxism claims that it is the material basis (mode of production) which in the last analysis is the determining factor.

Hegel, however, occupies a place apart from other idealistic philosophers in that he formulates a system of dialectics which, to a large extent, is taken over by Marx and his co-thinker, Engels. Marx and Engels, to put it bluntly, do nothing but turn Hegel's dialectic system upside down:

> Hegel was not simply put aside. On the contrary, one started out from his revolutionary side,...

> from the dialectical method. But this method was unusable in its Hegelian form. According to Hegel, dialectics is the self-development of the idea. The absolute idea not only exists--we know not where --from eternity, it is also the actual living soul of the whole existing world....
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> This ideological perversion had to be done away with. We comprehended the ideas in our heads materialistically again--as reflections (Abbilder) of real things instead of regarding the real things as reflections of this or that stage of the absolute idea....
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> In this way the dialectic of ideas itself became merely the conscious reflex of the dialectical movement of the real world and thus Hegel's dialectic was put on its head, or rather, from its head, on which it was standing, it was put on its feet.[1]

With a statement like this Engels exposes himself to the attacks from the idealists. They would bring forth the argument that since man is the product of his material surroundings then he is unable to change, why even to understand in depth, his own world! If the relationship between man and his material basis is a one way flow of determining factors from the latter to the former, then man must be completely powerless in the face of his economic foundation. In the last resort this would reduce man to a mere animal; and, certainly, such a conclusion was neither intended by Marx nor Engels.

The fact, however, that some professed materialists do propagate precisely such a philosophical stance does not make things easier for the adherents of dialectical materialism. The critics of dialectical materialism often overlook

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[1]Frederick Engels, Ludwig Feurbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), pp. 39-41.

the "dialectic" and focus in on the "materialistic," and consequently confuse what has been called, the vulgar and deterministic branch of materialism with the dialectical materialism developed by Marx and Engels.

This is some of the reason that I could write above that often it is the purely materialistic rather than the purely idealistic ideas which constitute the most irksome opponents. Disputes between close relatives tend to be more taxing than those between total strangers.

Marx himself, in an attack on the deterministic materialist Ludwig Feurbach, writes:

> The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forget that men themselves change circumstances and that the educator himself must be educated.[3]

Marxist dialectical materialism, then, is firmly rooted in the dialectic of Hegel: no absolute values exist. Kant's concepts "das Ding an sich" (the thing in itself) and "das Ding für mich" (the thing for me) are only conceived as relative absolutes in Hegelian and Marxist thought. The (hypothetical) absolute object (Ding an sich) only exists in its relationship to its phenomenal form (Ding für mich) or (hypothetical) absolute subject. This dialectic relationship negates the absoluteness of the object and the subject,

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[2]Ludwig A. Feurbach (1804-1872), German philosopher.

[3]Karl Marx, Theses on Feurbach, in F. Engels, Ludwig Feurbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, op. cit. p. 62.

respectively, and at the same time it resolves (hebt auf) the tension between the two antagonistic counterparts. They are unified in the concept of "ein Ding an und für sich" (a thing in and for itself).

In other words, there is a dialectic movement from thesis to antithesis to the resolved synthesis. As we shall see, this remains the basis of Marxist epistemology. Social reality or social being to Marx is a dialectic entity of essence (Wesen) and phenomenon (Erscheinung). These two entities are not absolutes, but dialectically connected as described above. Therefore, in order to understand a certain community one cannot merely establish certain fixed categories and then claim to have found the truth about the given community. The only thing one can arrive at is a determination of the movement between certain categories.

The central Marxian concept of the dialectic movement between the economic base and the ideological superstructure will serve well to exemplify this: the economic base, although an important determining factor in society, whether in the form of a slave, a feudal or a bourgeois/liberal economy, cannot be properly understood without an analysis and placing together with the ideological superstructure of that specific society. They do not exist in themselves, only together.

With the addition of Hegel's historicism, the constant change and movement in history towards a more and more perfect

society, which for Hegel was equivalent to the gradual realization of the absolute idea, and the addition of the Marxist reversal of this notion, i.e., that it was not a question of the realization of the absolute idea, but of the ideal economic base (communism), we now begin to see the contours of the Marxist historical materialism.

Marxist historians, sociologists, and aestheticians, a.o., are preoccupied with analyzing socio-historical realities on the basis of the dialectical materialistic and historical materialistic methods which I have sketched above. But Marxism is not just a question of interpreting the world correctly; it is also a question of changing it:

> The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.[4]

Consequently, all Marxist scientific inquiries are steeped in a spirit of social purpose. The correct analysis is only truly successful if it points out a way of improving the world. Marxist aesthetic inquiry is no exception from this rule, and it is precisely this, its insistence on an extroverted social practice, which has forced it into a clash with bourgeois aesthetics.

It would lead too far to go into an explicit discussion of the history of bourgeois aesthetics. Allow me to delineate briefly some of its central tenets. I am aware

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[4]Karl Marx, Theses on Feurbach, p. 65.

that I am lumping together a multitude of divergent schools, and that, at worst, I do nothing but confuse the reader; at best, I provide him with a framework within which the various bourgeois schools, in spite of their differences, will fit.

Bourgeois aesthetics, on the whole, regards art as an almost sacrosanct matter. Its dominant theories bear heavily on the idealistic (Platonic) notions of the purity of ideas and the baseness of matter. Art, since it is a spiritual endeavor,[5] soars above the crude social realities in which the given artist lives. True art should seek beauty and truth, concepts which in bourgeois society are taken to be objective and ahistoric values.

With the above ideas as my starting point I venture to suggest that the birth of our present day bourgeois aesthetic tradition was coincident with the revival of interest in the ancient Greek and Roman cultures which swept Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries, the Renaissance, in other words. With the discovery that, for instance, poetry could affect people aesthetically centuries after its creation, the conclusion that art was independent of time and social change was close at hand. The concept of universality in art, so very central in bourgeois aesthetics, dates back to this time.

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[5]This (prescribed) spirituality of "true art" is in part a reflex from the fact that the European bourgeois art tradition has, historically, sought to avoid physical involvement and has emphasized a reposeful and intellectual art practice.

Now, Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries can hardly be pronounced capitalist or liberal--the presence of which, in some form, is a prerequisite for speaking of any bourgeois ideological manifestations. At that time feudalism was still dominant although decay had started to spread. However, one could argue that the Renaissance in certain areas anticipated the bourgeois revolution. The ideas about universal human values are definitely premature echoes of the liberal humanism which holds sway in the so-called "humanistic sciences" of the West today.

Of course, the growth of humanistic ideas in the feudal age was not a totally unintegrated occurrence; rather, it was a reflex from the birth of capitalist enterprise, early mercantile capitalism, as well as a reflex from the ideological sphere. In a word, it was an innovation brought about by dialectic forces.

But let me return to the controversy between Marxist and bourgeois aesthetics:

> The basic view of materialistic aesthetics is that the question of art and culture must be brought back to the material and socio-historical process. From the time of the very inception of capitalism bourgeois aesthetics has understood art and culture as peculiar, almost heavenly phenomena, whose specificity was supposed to be precisely an autonomous status in their relationship with history and social reality. By establishing art as an isolated phenomenon in relation to the social practice it could be defined as an elevated moral authority which, in total accordance with the world picture of the bourgeois world, raised itself above, evaded, and maybe even made "divine" statements about the trivial matters of this world. In other words, the aesthetic

> practice was hypostatized as the very quintessence of "humanistic values." (translated from the Danish original).[6]

Marxist aestheticians reject the notion that art should be endowed with an "autonomous" and "divine" status. Art to them is a means through which the world may be perceived. It gives us an alternative angle from which we can learn about ourselves, and, by that token, it puts in our hands an important tool with which we may change the world and ourselves.

These two aspects, which I shall call the methodical and the functional, constitute the basis of Marxist materialistic aesthetics. And each of them represents the basis of the two main schools in Marxist aesthetics in the 20th century, schools which do not necessarily exclude each other, but which have, nevertheless, engaged in several disputes against each other. In the following I shall briefly outline the two schools through an analysis of the aesthetic ideas of an exponent of each school. First I shall outline the aesthetics of the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukacs (1885-1971), whom I take to belong to the methodical school; and next I shall delineate the aesthetics of the German writer/critic Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who was a functional aesthetician.

The methodical school of Marxist aesthetics demands

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[6]Peter Nyord and Kurt Dahl Christiansen (eds.), Materialistisk AEstetik, (Odense Universitetsforlag, 1978), p. 9.

that a piece of art should be seen as a human product which lends to mankind a special view of the universe, a view which no other branch of human mental activity can produce. Like most bourgeois aestheticians, for instance George Santayana and Benedetto Croce,[7] Lukacs believes that man learns about his world partly through intuition, aesthetic perception, and partly through logic, scientific perception. This distinction dates back to Kant's epistemology, and has become a common heritage of bourgeois as well as Marxist philosophy.

Lukacs employs the terms aesthetic and scientific reflection (i.e., mirroring) about these two areas of human cognition. Let me take the latter first:

Scientific reflection has the function of separating the subject from the object. Man actively and by means of his intellect separates himself from nature in order to grasp the laws and movements of the material world which surrounds him. This enables man to master nature as he is capable of employing his rational discoveries through working with and changing the material world. Logical or scientific thinking becomes a deliberate abstraction from the apparent unity of man and nature. It is a purposeful activity.

The aesthetic reflection (here the active and creative aesthetic reflection, see below), on the other hand, retains the unit of man and nature, because intuitively man does not

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[7]See George Santayana, The Sense of Beauty (New York: Dover Publications, 1955) (1896); and Benedetto Croce, AEsthetic (The Noonday Press, 1968) (1909).

distinguish between an objective and subjective world.

> Contrary to the accentuating of the scientific reflection of the distance between subject and object the aesthetic reflection retains the unity in the diversity. [An]...anthropomorphic principle assumes a homogeneity between the subjective and the objective reality which are reflected in a perspective in which it appears as man's "eigene Welt" (own world).[8]

The scientific reflection is disanthropomorphic whereas the aesthetic reflection is anthropomorphic. These two modes of reflection, Lukacs claims, are both founded in a third mode of reflection, namely the so-called everyday reflection. It must be the daily and ordinary human practice (work) which, ultimately, forms the basis of all other human activities, including the scientific and the aesthetic modes of reflection. The habits, mythologies, and images which grow out of man's ordinary social life constitute the unity which the scientific and the aesthetic reflections, each in their own way, mediate, a unity which is achieved through an unconscious process of internalization and objectification.

However, there is a closer affinity between the everyday and the aesthetic reflection than between the everyday and the scientific reflection. This is owing to the fact that the aesthetic and the everyday reflection each have their point of gravity in the sensual perception of man; they both focus in on man as the sensuous nexus between the objective world of matter and the subjective consciousness. They

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[8]Nyord & Christiansen, Materialistisk Æstetik, p. 260.

differ in that the creative aesthetic reflection sets up its own version of the world, where, in comparison, the everyday reflection is confined to being the mere passive taking in of sensuous stimuli.

> The characteristic quality of the aesthetic reflection is the break-up of the immediate unity of theory and practice, consciousness and being, in that the aesthetic reflection makes itself independent from the reflected reality in "aesthetisches Gebilde" (aesthetic education). The reflection is no longer an immediate element in practice, but goes beyond the reflected reality as an independent and self-contained entity; it is objectified, steps out of the process and becomes fixed as a result.[9]

The value of art to Lukacs, then, becomes its potential of informing man about his everyday world. Art is a catalyst which offers man an alternative entrance into an understanding of himself; and it does so through the same sensuous materials through which we are used to perceiving our environment. Science may teach man to conquer and master nature as an object, but art teaches man to understand himself in and with nature.

> ...both modes of reflection render an adequate reflection of reality, and...it is the same reality which is being reflected, however, from different perspectives--the scientific reflection from a disanthropomorphic and the artistic from an anthropomorphic perspective;--and from different cognitive interests--the scientific analysis of the objective reality as something independent of man, and the artistic rendering of reality as man's own world.[10]

Lukacs combines the above conclusions with his Marxist convictions. In order for a piece of art--in most cases

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[9]Ibid., p. 261.

[10]Ibid., p. 265.

Lukacs uses literature as an example--to be truly successful it must reflect the major social and historical movements of the specific society which it mirrors. If it fails to perceive (incorporate in its form) the really fundamental forces of a given social reality it has not dealt realistically with its material. If a novel does not render fragments of the really essential aspects of human social life it is void of any meaning; it is merely a haphazard mirroring of chaos which can in no way add to our understanding of ourselves; it can only delude us.

It follows from this that a piece of art is of necessity partial, i.e., political, because it, in order to be a truthful rendering of reality, must reflect what is happening in a given society in such a way that not only the superficial phenomena, but also the essential socio-historical forces are perceivable to the reader. To a Marxist critic a piece of art must therefore portray the proletariat as the progressive force in society in order to be truthful. I should add that such a portrait need not be a direct and naturalistic description of the advancing social class. Lukacs greatly admired the surrealists, and even considered James Joyce an important innovator of creative writing. Important innovator in the sense that he opened new doors to an aesthetic representation of social reality. As can be seen, Lukacs never confined his understanding of "social reality" to factory noise and picket lines.

At this point I should introduce Lukacs' distinction between partiality, which is the distinctive feature of all good art, and tendency, which is the artist's direct and conscious taking sides for or against some element in his work of art, propagandistic art, in other words. The latter may have a function in a particular historical period in the sense that it may educate people politically; but it is nothing but an appendage to some ideology, and it will never raise itself above this level, i.e., it will never become aesthetic reflection.

Now, this may not appear to be an ordinary statement from a Marxist aesthetician. We have become more or less used to hearing that only art which makes direct and pronounced contributions to the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie can be accepted in Marxist circles. Certainly the peculiar history of the so-called Socialist Realism of the USSR has made us almost expect that Marxist literary criticism should contain the dogmatic insistence that literature should show its "progressive socialist attitude" on each and every page.[11]

However, such an attitude was never intended by the founding fathers of Marxism. In a letter to writer Minna Kautsky Engels wrote:

> You apparently felt an urge to make a public announcement about your convictions, to give testimony about your beliefs in this book [Die Alten

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[11]See Edward Mozejko, Den Socialistiske Realisme (Gyldendal, 1977).

> und die Neuen]....It has been done, you are past that point and need not repeat it in this form. I am in no way an opponent of tendentious writing as such....But I do believe that the tendency should emanate from the situation and the story itself, without an explicit pointing at, and without the author being compelled to give to the reader the historical solution of the days to come of those social conflicts which he portrays.[12]

"The tendency should emanate from the situation and the story itself": this is the crucial point in Engels' statement. The aesthetic form of a piece of art should contain the political content. Not, as dogmatic Marxists would have it, that the aesthetic form is irrelevant to the political content; often being accused of being nothing but the invention of decadent bourgeois art conception. Let me quote a couple of prominent Marxist aestheticians to set this distorted picture right.

> The critical function of art, its contribution to the liberating fight, lies in the aesthetic form. A piece of art is authentic or true neither because of its content (i.e., the "correct" way of rendering the social reality) nor because of its "pure" form; but because the content has become form.[13]

> The aesthetic cognition is not of the same nature as the scientific, but as cognition of reality poetry, music, and the visual arts do not belong in the sphere of ideology.
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> The means of expression of these art forms, language, color, rhythm, sound, structure, symmetry and asymmetry, harmony and disharmony, are not of ideological origin or nature and they mostly

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[12]F. Engels, "Letter to Minna Kautsky," in Leif Søndergard Anderson (ed.), Marxistisk Litteraturteori (København: Bibliotek Rhodos, 1973), p. 48.

[13]Herbert Marcuse, Den Æstetiske Dimension (Byldendals Uglebøger, 1979), p. 24. German original, 1977.

> develop independently from the influence of ideology.[14]

Let me return to Lukacs' idea of the aesthetic reflection which assumes a peculiar quality in the face of the scientific and the everyday reflection. It is precisely this which both Engels, Marcuse, and Fisher aim at: aesthetic representation is a singular mode of human reflection, and in order to understand completely its uniqueness we should not regard it as merely another piece of objective reality which our rational faculties may dissect as they please. We thereby destroy an important source of knowledge about ourselves. We should construct an independent mode of analysis which is geared to fit the peculiarity of its object.

> If we want to grasp intellectually the peculiarity of the partiality of the aesthetic reflection of reality we have to direct our attention towards that; on the one hand, it is a question about the most truthful representation of the same objective reality [same objective reality which confronts the scientist], but on the other hand, the goal is not to arrive at an intellectual understanding of the general lawfulness of this objective reality. On the contrary, the goal is the directly intelligible, symbolic creation of something peculiar, which in itself combines, resolves its universality as well as its specificity, the elaboration of which does not strive towards a general application in a scientific sense; but which, in accordance with its creation through the form which has been given this specific content, is directed at the possibility of being universally relived.[15]

I shall now leave the methodical school and take a look at the functional school of Marxist aesthetics. This

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[14]Ernst Fisher, "Ideologi og Kunst," in L. S. Anderson (ed.), Marxistisk Litteraturteori, p. 341.

[15]Georg Lukacs, Partiskhed, p. 236.

school is concerned primarily with the social effect of art, its revoluationary potential. I shall exemplify it by pointing out central ideas in the aesthetics of Bertolt Brecht. I need not explain the basic aesthetic and political attitudes of Brecht since they, to a large extent, are identical with those of Lukacs; only I shall pull out the crucial points of disagreement between the two.

The two Marxists agree that the best art is produced by the artist who is familiar with and sympathetic towards the scientific method of interpreting society invented by Marx. Only the artist who clearly sees the basic struggle of society, i.e., the class struggle, as the true dynamic force in the development of human societies is capable of producing truly revolutionary art. But whereas Lukacs allows for several bourgeois artists to have some progressive impact on the social development, Brecht only very reluctantly does so. Brecht is much more concerned with the correct analysis of reality than with the correct aesthetic rendering of it. And herein lies their basic difference.

> ...the basic theoretical discord between Lukacs and Brecht is the different evaluation of the status and function of abstraction in the aesthetic reflection and reception. Brecht identifies aesthetic and scientific reflection and thus retains the abstraction, the separation of the elements. In this way the ambition of totality is only reached in the very process in which the artifact takes part. Lukacs, on the other hand, demands the resolving of the abstraction and the unity of the elements in the aesthetic reflection, so that the ambition of totality is reached in the artifact itself.[16]

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[16]Flemming Houe og Jørgen Dines Johansen, "Til en Konfrontation mellem Lukacs og Adorno," in P. Hyord og K. D.

Brecht views art first and foremost as a political weapon. The form must always be subordinated to the function of a piece of art. The fact that such a functional stance may stifle the creative imagination of the artist, since an aesthetic reflection does not consist of scientific elements (see Lukacs above), is wholly understood by Brecht. However, he does not change his attitude as he believes that the beauty of a delicate and precise aesthetic rendering is somewhat of a luxury when one considers the atrocities of the capitalist system. Seen in that light the loss of the formal integrity is not really significant. And further he maintains that

> Our poets did not lose their voice because of the book Das Kapital so much as they did because of capital itself.[17]

In other words, when certain artists felt that their muse was quenched when they took up Marxism it was not because the science of Marxism itself was the miscreant, but rather, it was the truth about society which was revealed through it which had the negative impact. The beauty which such artists had been able to create before taking up Marxism, it follows, was nothing but unrealistic and escapist dream visions; it had no place in the real world.

This leads on to Brecht's clash with the beauty seeking and allegedly apolitical bourgeois aesthetic tradition.

Christiansen (eds.), Materialistisk AEstetik, p. 270.

[17]Bertolt Brecht, quoted in Erik Nielsen, Brechts realisme-konception, p. 184.

He would rather abandon the pursuit of aesthetic integrity altogether than run the risk of being confused with the, in his opinion, escapist and cowardly bourgeois artists, who merely fled the world of misery into their private ivory towers.

Lukacs, as we have seen, would claim that the aesthetic integrity of a literary work should sometimes be judged of more value than the political correctness. Such an attitude, to Brecht, is almost as reprehensible as the bourgeois formalistic school; and, in fact, in the 30s he made a violent attack on Lukacs, claiming that the latter was nothing but a lackey of the bourgeoisie. However, as this open dispute between the two critics was, in part, the result of an insufficient knowledge on the part of Brecht of Lukacs' extensive writings I shall not go into this in detail.[18]

The word "beauty" rarely occurs in Brecht's writings, and if it does, it is the beauty of revolutionary action, the beauty of the downfall of the decadent bourgeois Establishment, etc. His own plays bear heavily on this. They are not constructed to please an audience; on the contrary, they are set up deliberately to shock, frighten, and to mystify (alienate) it. And then, of course, to teach it a revolutionary lesson.

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[18]See Erik Nielsen, Brechts realisme-konception, p. 174.

These two poles of Marxist aesthetics, the methodical and the functional, are found today in various guises throughout the world. Usually the functional school is being propagated by critics who are directly involved in revolutionary fighting--be it with the pen or the sword. As we shall see, the Black Arts Movement of the U.S.A. in the 1960s is a good example of this. And the methodical school seems to be more at home in the comparative quiet of certain university campuses, notably in Western Europe.

I do not think that they ought to exclude each other entirely, however. They ought to enter into a fruitful relationship. As should be clear, I have here touched upon a theme which abounds in intricate complications. I shall make no attempt to unify them in this paper; I shall merely point out that they seem to be complementary to one another: the methodical school is practically invalid in an immediate cultural fight, where, on the other hand, the functional thrives. This latter, however, seems to be irritatingly coarse and unimaginative when faced with the rather central question of what art and beauty are all about; beauty not in any idealistic sense of the word--social beauty, if you will--where the methodical school definitely has something to say.

CHAPTER II

THE AMERICAN AESTHETIC SITUATION

When some Blackamerican scholars in the 1960s chose the term "the Black Aesthetic" to denote their cultural nationalistic stance, it should be clear that they did so for very deliberate reasons. The very coupling of the word "black" with "aesthetic" has political significance. Not only because of the word "black," which in itself represents a deliberate clash with the white mainstream, but more specifically because "aesthetic" in the U.S.A. had become a synonym of "white beauty."

Where the European Marxist aestheticians have had to fight an idealistic aesthetic tradition the Blackamerican aestheticians have had to fight a white and idealistic tradition. The "white beauty" of the American aesthetic tradition is propped up by the same philosophical tenets as is the European "bourgeois beauty" (see pp. 15-17 above); but a very significant color spectrum has been added, owing to the racial composition of the American population.

The result of this infusion of a color spectrum into the alleged value-free bourgeois aesthetic tradition has been a normative aesthetic system, which, in all particulars,

contains white values. The minority groups of the U.S.A. have thus been forced to live within a society which has only reluctantly allowed for a positive representation of themselves. They have been forced to see themselves through the eyes of their masters/oppressors.

Because of the peculiar outlook of the so-called American "Melting Pot"; or rather, the unique cultural and racial laboratory, which may be a better picture of what the American society really is, no true "melting together" of ethnic groups has ever taken place; the "only" thing that has happened is that certain elements of the various cultures have combined into a host of interesting and original compounds;[1] a very special set of rules must be constructed to cope with the cultural situation.

The reason that the "Melting Pot" image does not work is that the American society contains a certain substance which has at all times made a true fusion between its various components impossible. I am alluding to the substance "whiteness," which in the U.S.A. has assumed an enormous power in its own right, a power which may break down the chemical composition of other substances, but which cannot be destroyed by anything, except by itself.

If one retains this laboratory imagery, it is possible to establish a cultural hierarchy of the various ethnic groups

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[1]This line of reasoning was suggested to me by Dr. Carolyn Fowler, Atlanta University.

in the U.S.A. in which the most significant and weighty quality is "whiteness"; but which contains several other denominators. These latter, however, often have a close affinity with "whiteness" in order to have any real value.

I White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs)
II White Anglo-Saxon non-Protestants (WASnP)
III White non-Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WnASP)
IV White non-Anglo-Saxon non-Protestants (WnASnP)
V non-White non-Anglo-Saxon (non)-Protestants (NwNAS(n)P)[2]

There should be a sharp dividing line between the fourth and the fifth grouping. The members of the top four categories may move up in the hierarchy. Thus it is possible for a white Catholic to move up to the very top (the Kennedy clan, for instance), but it is almost impossible for the non-whites to move even as high as the fourth category.

Now, the thing that has caused all the trouble is not only the white power which, it should be clear, constitutes an all-important factor in American social life, it is also the fact that the white self-conception, notably on a scholarly level, has, consciously or unconsciously, prevented a realization of the social value inherent in "whiteness." Of course, I am here talking about the more subtle forms of ethnocentricity, not about the straightforward racism which

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[2]Adopted after Dr. Margaret Rowley, Atlanta University.

motivates groupings like the K.K.K. The members of such organizations are extremely aware of the value of whiteness. On some levels of white America there seems to be a deep-seated reluctance to see that white is a color. It has been found sufficient to pronounce all the darker hues to be colors, i.e., all but white Americans are peoples of color to whom social stigmata should be attached. As I have stated before, the European scholarly tradition is to blame for this subtle kind of racism.

In Europe, where the populations have been much more homogeneous, there was some justification for conceptualizing white as a non-color. Everybody was white, and it would not have any meaning to ascribe any kind of social value to that. Not so in the U.S.A. Here whiteness became a relative factor which gradually became an extremely potent social force. Something which was not properly reflected in the white self-conception. The whites took their European cultural heritages with them across the Atlantic without revising them.

It needs mentioning that the European tradition is not totally without racist dispositions. Even though Europe may seem to be non-racist when compared with the U.S.A., most Western European countries have a well documented practice of discrimination against the so-called foreign workers (mostly people who have come to highly industrialized Northern Europe from the predominantly agricultural Southern Europe, Turkey, and the Near East). And further, in all their relations to their former colonies they maintain a definite

ethnocentric attitude. One need only mention the atrocities which were committed all the way through the European imperialist era.

What I have just described has a very central position in the realm of aesthetics. The European bourgeois aesthetic tradition virtually became a Pandora's Box of all kinds of ethnocentric presumptions when it was suddenly placed in the middle of a multitude of foreign cultures. It did not redefine its basic tenets, it simply steam-rollered through the self-images, beauty-concepts, and cultural traditions of all the other peoples. George Kent describes this Euro-American aesthetic tradition as "high ground humanism":

> By high ground humanism, I mean the established values implicit in white writers (whether agonized over or promoted), derived from Hebrew, Greek, Roman traditions: the assumed triumph of the individual, the clarity of truth, the existence of transcendental beauty, the shining virtues of rationality, the glory of democratic freedom, and the range of Christian and Platonic assumptions that tend to form stubborn threads in the warp and woof of white tradition as a systematic and ABSTRACT universalism.[3]

All ethnic groups and all cultures have a specific aesthetic: a sense of the appropriateness of forms, objects, sound, rhythm, color, etc.[4] Each culture has a peculiar value system which is derived from the peculiar social practices, traditions and history of that particular society. This value

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[3]George Kent, Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, Third World Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1972, p. 9.

[4]Adopted from a course in Blackamerican Aesthetics, Spring 1979, conducted by Dr. C. Fowler, Atlanta University.

system, in turn, is what characterizes one such culture from all others.

If one culture establishes the dogma that its values are the only true ones, as for instance the Euro-American universality dogma, it follows that a conflict between the different ways of perceiving appropriateness will arise. Now, if such two conflicting modes of perceiving the world happen to coexist in the same political and geographical area, and one of these is being supported by an economic leadership position, as is the case within the U.S.A., where a white aesthetic holds sway over a black, we can no longer talk only about an aesthetic or cultural conflict; it has become an all-pervasive political battle.

Let me give an example of this. In the Euro-American aesthetic tradition women have come to represent an archetype of beauty. So drenched is the Euro-American culture with the idea that women, before all, must be beautiful, that it has become the foremost prerequisite of being a successful woman. How does such an aesthetic prerequisite affect women who happen to be non-whites? E. Simms Campbell writes:

> ...in America, judging from all the blonde-haired lassies staring at us from the pages of innumerable magazines, the prerequisite of beauty would appear to be blondeness. This is a conception which advertisers who sell us their lotions, tooth powders, brassiers, dresses, skin lotions, and beauty preparations, have foisted upon the American public. Advertisers, in turn, have convinced themselves that the masses look up to this particular standard of the ideally-beautiful American woman. The phrase, ideally beautiful, makes more verbal music than common sense....

> So subtly influential is the propaganda that it is possible for a certain race to have a monopoly on beauty that Negroes and white people fail to see the fallacy in such a theory. Adequate proof of this is the fact that many Negro women still use skin whitening creams, bleaches and hair dyes in the mad pursuit of the huckster's dream of perfect beauty.[5]

Campbell touches on the core of the whole matter: "So subtly influential is the propaganda that it is possible for a certain race to have a monopoly on beauty." It is neither a matter of an explicit political decree, nor is there a law against black, brown, yellow or red beauty. It is a matter of a variety of aesthetic stimuli, on an "everyday" and on an "aesthetic" level (cf., Lukacs), which together constitute a normative standard whose effect is much stronger than any political decree could ever hope to be.

When a certain minority group is constantly being bombarded with a white version of beauty through the educational system, advertisement, television, movies, books, paintings, etc., and this minority, at the same time, can see that the power elite are all whites, then it does not take long for this group of people to start striving for whiteness.

Let me tie this up more closely to the ideas of Lukacs: when the everyday reflection as well as the aesthetic reflection in a given society mediate an aesthetic hierarchy of values, the total sensuous system of the population of that society must necessarily respond to it. There is only one

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[5]E. Simms Campbell, "Are Black Women Beautiful?" in Negro Digest, June 1951.

way around it, and that is the denunciation of the said hierarchy through an application of scientific reflection, i.e., a logical rejection of the hierarchy. Only this latter is capable of dissecting the everyday and the aesthetic reflections and getting to the corrupt elements.

The self-conception of bourgeois aesthetics does not embody such a scientific and analytical element. Therefore, it is incapable of dealing critically with aesthetic matters (Marxist aesthetics, with its insistence on a scientific analysis, fulfills such a requirement). If, at that, the self-avowed apolitical aesthetic tradition, which, in fact, props up an ethnocentric value system, is being supported or complemented by an "independent" scientific tradition, which nevertheless also adheres to an ethnocentric value system, it should be clear that the total output of biased values must assume enormous proportions.

The tragic thing is that the social sciences of the U.S.A. are guilty of precisely such a distorted contribution to the public formation of opinion. From the field of sociolinguistics William Labov writes about the failure of white scientists to grasp the real cause and effect relations in language acquisition of black ghetto children:

> In this area, the deficit theory appears as the concept of "verbal deprivation": Negro children from the ghetto area receive little verbal stimulation, are said to hear very little well-formed language, and as a result are impoverished in their means of verbal expression....Unfortunately, these notions are based upon the work of educational psychologists

> who know very little about language and even less about Negro children. The concept of verbal deprivation has no basis in social reality....[6]

In the U.S.A. aesthetics is particularly value loaded. Although in Europe, as well as everywhere else, aesthetics should also be seen as a theory of values, the American reality presents a much more complex situation which consequently calls for a much more sensitive aesthetic apparatus. The neglect on the part of white aesthetics to readjust itself to the complex American reality has caused some of the problems which I shall comment on in this paper. The black aesthetic tradition of the U.S.A. is precisely an attempt to correct the biased white tradition.

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[6]W. Labov, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," in A. Cashdan et al. (eds.), Language in Education (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, The Open University Press, 1977), (1972), p. 198.

CHAPTER III

BLACK AESTHETICS (BEFORE THE 1960s)

A black aesthetic has been in existence as long as black people have lived on this planet Earth. It originates in Africa, but as a result of the capitalist and imperialist expansion of certain Western European countries, in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, it was carried to the Americas on board slave ships to be planted in the various slave economies of the New World.

The first black Africans landed in North America in 1619. They, however, were not slaves; slavery was only introduced later as laborers to work the fields of the white plantations became a great want, and no white workers were available.[1]

From the time of the first contacts between whites and blacks a cultural battle has been fought along with the economic/political; indeed, they neither can nor should be separated. When the slaveholders of the Old South put a ban on all kinds of black cultural activity, language, storytelling, dances, music and musical instruments, clothing,

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[1]See Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower, (New York: Pelican Books, 1976).

etc.,[2] it was done because of the acute awareness that such aesthetic elements constituted a source of strength for the slaves. If the slaveholders succeeded in destroying the cultural tradition of the slaves they would not be able to create a sense of solidarity among themselves. If the slaveholders took away all the images of self which the slaves possessed it would be almost impossible for them to muster up enough strength to revolt against the white exploiters.

There are big differences between the overt enslavement of the blacks in the time before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and the more subtle exploitation which they are experiencing as "free" men in the American capitalist society of today. But except for the nominal change in the ideological self-conception of the ruling class, from a semi-feudal to a bourgeois/liberal, it is a question how much has, in the last analysis, really been changed.

One of the best indications of the stability of white exploitation, the nominal change in the political system notwithstanding, has been provided by Charles S. Johnson in his study of the rural blacks of Alabama (conducted in the late 1920s and early 30s).[3] Johnson shows that the change from a slave economy to a system of peonage changed very little for the ordinary rural blacks. They are still completely

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[2]See M. J. Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

[3]Charles S. Johnson, Shadow of the Plantation (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969) (1934).

under the thumb of the whites. But I need not go back so far in time. The quotation from E. Simms Campbell's article (see above pp. 35-36) likewise gives proof that the black population of the U.S.A. in our time have been the victims of white domination and exploitation--although Campbell's article puts forth no statistical documentation--an exploitation which demands a counteroffensive on all levels, economic, political, and aesthetic.

> When we consider that the black man sees white cultural and racial images projected upon the whole extent of his universe, we cannot help but realize that a very great deal of the time the black man sees a zero image of himself....We realize now that we are involved in a black-white war over the control of image. For to manipulate an image is to control a peoplehood. Zero image has for a long time meant the repression of our peoplehood. (my underlining)[4]

Whereas an aesthetic battle has always been the inevitable companion of the political battle between whites and blacks a scientific and methodical study of this specific aspect, the aesthetic dimension, of political resistance is of recent date. The distinction that I am drawing here is between the often "inarticulate" aesthetic of a specific cultural group and the "articulate" science of aesthetics.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s produced an overwhelming body of material which indicated that blacks in the U.S.A. had started to become aware that it was important to create truthful images of themselves, in order to correct the

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[4]Carolyn F. Gerald (Fowler), "The Black Writer and His Role," in The Black Aesthetic (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 352-53.

aesthetic monopoly which whites had on representing blacks in the arts. There were several precursors to the Harlem Renaissance, however. One of these was W. E. B. Du Bois, who, incidentally, remained a central figure until his death in 1963.

In 1903 Du Bois published the very influential The Souls of Black Folk.[5] In a series of articles and essays Du Bois demonstrates a profound sensibility for the peculiarly black culture of the U.S.A. Here are explained for the first time the subtleties of the white cultural imperialism, which had hitherto been overshadowed by the overt political and economic encroachments of the independence of the blacks.

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (my underlining)[6]

This passage may rightly denote the birth of the black aesthetics. It experienced its first "revival" as early as the 1920s.

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[5]Has been published several times since then; see, for instance, Three Negro Classics (New York: Avon Books, 1965).

[6]Ibid., pp. 214-15.

From the very beginning the "New Negro" scholars propagated a self-conscious and positive representation of Blackamerica. Everywhere they demonstrated that they were tired of the one-sided and stereotyped renderings of blacks, which had become the characteristics of white artists' endeavors into the black world. But they also had a strong indebtedness to the white art tradition, an indebtedness which may have hindered a full realization of the important position of the aesthetic battle in the overall political struggle of Blackamerica.

Although one certainly should have reservations about the Harlem Renaissance, it nevertheless was a very successful beginning of an aesthetic consciousness movement, which may be said to have found itself entirely only within the last ten or fifteen years.

> What we can see today, after all charges have been recorded, is that the Renaissance made paths through what had been stubborn thickets. It put muscles on non-literary institutions, such as newspapers, the Urban League, the NAACP, labor leadership, which, however we may now categorize them ideologically, were to become powerful weight lifters. From the literary point of view, it made a strategic turn at the forks of the road....
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> If today, we can sometimes jog, rather than puff, down the road toward self definition, it would seem that the Harlem Renaissance was a father who should not go without thanks or reverence.[7]

It was heavily influenced by the white bourgeois tradition--and one has to say, "how could it be otherwise?"--or as

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[7]George Kent, Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture, p. 31.

George Kent puts it elsewhere, "high ground humanism." However, this "high ground humanism" does not necessarily disqualify all of its results. Alain Locke, the chief mentor of the Harlem Renaissance, may express a bourgeois art conception in the following quotation; but before he reaches the conclusion, that the peculiar conditions of Blackamericans are the potential raw material of a new "classical art," he certainly touches upon some crucial issues which must make us wonder what precisely he means by "classical art."

> Negro youth speaks out of an unique experience and with a particular representativeness. All classes of a people under social pressure are permeated with a common experience; they are emotionally welded as others cannot be. With them, ordinary living has epic depth and lyric intensity, and this, their material handicap, is their spiritual advantage. So, in a day when art has run to classes, cliques and coteries, and life lacks more and more a vital common background, the Negro artist, out of the depths of his group and personal experience, has to his hand almost the conditions of a classical art.[8]

Apart from the apparent plea that art must seek its material in the social foundations of the people, note the sharp condemnation of the empty middle-class values of the American society. The high ground vocabulary notwithstanding Locke is not content with merely copying the white standards.

And later on Locke definitely infuses the old conventional phrases of bourgeois art theory with a completely new content. First he quotes the young black writer Jean Toomer:

> Georgia opened me. And it may well be said that I received my initial impulse to an individual art

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[8]Alain Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," in The New Negro, Alain Locke (ed.), (New York: Atheneum, 1975) (1925).

> from my experience there. For no other section of the country has so stirred me. There one finds soil, soil in the sense the Russians know it,--the soil every art and literature that is to live must be imbedded in.
>
> The newer motive, then, in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art. Nowhere is this more apparent, or more justified than in the increasing tendency to evolve from the racial substance something technically distinctive, something that as an idiom of style may become a contribution to the general resources of art.[9]

If Locke means to propagate the insipid bourgeois notion of "art for art's sake," "pure and detached art," etc., he certainly betrays his own intentions. The point he seems to be stressing the most is the indebtedness of artistic representation to its social and cultural roots, rather than its aloofness.

Du Bois also reveals such a duality. On the one hand he uses a vocabulary which comes right out of the Euro-American "high ground" tradition, and on the other hand, he reveals a passionate race consciousness and pride which does not really belong in the genteel tradition.

At a certain point Du Bois is forced to go outside the framework of this tradition, but for a long time he did not change the basic vocabulary--even though a definite radicalization of his thought is detectable. In the following two quotations, one from 1921 and one from 1926, it is possible to see this move:

> Negro art is today plowing a difficult row, chiefly because we shrink at the portrayal of the truth about

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[9]Ibid., p. 51.

ourselves....We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and the highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one.

This is wrong and in the end harmful. We have a right, in our effort to get just treatment, to insist that we produce something of the best in human character and that it is unfair to judge us by our criminals and our prostitutes. This is justifiable propaganda.

On the other hand, we face the Truth of Art. We have criminals and prostitutes...just as all folk have. The black Shakespeare must portray his black Iagos as well as his white Othellos.

We shrink from this. We fear that evil in us will be called racial, while in others it is viewed as individual....

The results are not merely negative--they are positively bad. With a vast wealth of human material about us, our own artists and writers fear to paint the truth lest they criticize their own and be in turn criticized for it. They fail to see the Eternal Beauty that shines through all Truth, and try to portray a world of stilted artificial black folk such as never were on land or sea.[10]

Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before. And what have been the tools of the artist in times gone by? First of all, he has used the Truth--not for the sake of truth, not as the scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding. Again artists have used Goodness--goodness in all its aspects of justice, honor and right--not for sake of an ethical sanction but as the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest.

The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is, but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice; and slavery dogs him only when he is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize an ideal of Justice.

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[10]W. E. B. Du Bois, "Negro Art," in The Crisis, June 1921, reprinted in Henry Lee Moon (ed.), The Emerging Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

> Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists....I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. (my underlining)[11]

In the first article he more or less repeats the traditional tenets of bourgeois art tradition; although he maintains his avid race consciousness. The statement is in full accordance with that of Locke (see above). In the next he has changed the basic content and value of the concepts which he uses: the former antithetical concepts of art and propaganda have become one. (Du Bois, in the latter article, also writes much more carefully and on a deeper level; I do not intend to make a comparison of the two texts in this regard.) Although such a conclusion may be extracted from the early text, it is only in the one from 1926 that he dares give voice to it explicitly. He is in a process of freeing himself from the shackles of the Euro-American tradition. When he, at last, retorts that all art must be propaganda, he breaks one of the sacred tenets in the white aesthetic tradition, which, above all, seeks to keep beauty on one level and politics, racial issues, and propaganda on another.

Du Bois, as yet, not particularly preoccupied with Marxism, has succeeded in bringing back art to the material and socio-historical process; which is precisely what the European Marxist aestheticians were concerned with.[12]

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[11]W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in The Crisis, October 1926, reprinted in Moon.

[12]See quotation from P. Nyord and K. D. Christiansen (eds.), Materialistisk AEstetik, above pp. 17-18.

Also, in the last text, one should note the passage "...he has used Truth--not for the sake of truth, not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding...The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion." One does not have to be specifically good at abstracting from the high ground vocabulary to see that Du Bois has come pretty close to articulating the basic content of Lukacs aesthetic theory. Lukacs had initiated and invented his own theoretical terminology, and he may seem to be completely out of touch with a bourgeois aesthetic theory; however, this is not quite the case. Lukacs, like Du Bois to a great extent, utilizes the standards of bourgeois aesthetics. He is especially preoccupied with the "truthful" aesthetic rendering of the objective world. Not, of course, because he cherishes the "purity" and the "aloofness" of the artifact, but because he sees in such a truthful reflection an alternative way of understanding, and by that token, of changing our world.

Both scholars, at approximately the same time, incidentally, formulated new aesthetic theories which were both a critique of and a transcendence of the genteel tradition--and on some remarkable points they coincide.

It was only later that Du Bois started to employ a Marxist terminology; and then, as also earlier, his main

concern was not that of an aesthetician. He was throughout his career always engaged in many different areas. He was a teacher, a politician, a writer, and a critic. Consequently one cannot expect to find in his writings a coherent aesthetic theory. The instances where he does address such a subject explicitly, however, are by no means the mere scribbling of an indifferent thinker. They give evidence that in this area, as in all others, Du Bois was quite at home.

I see no point in trying to push a comparison of Du Bois and Lukacs to the extreme. Their theories show parallels, but grave disagreements as well. The interesting point in this connection is not whether they influenced each other directly or not, but rather, the fact that both men reacted to what they felt was an obsolete art theory. They felt that it was out of date because they were deeply involved with social inequities in their respective societies. Lukacs was siding with and fighting for the rights of the proletariat of Hungary; and Du Bois was concerned with the oppressed blacks in the U.S.A. The similarity in their theories stems from a similarity in their respective social environments.

Within these two social contexts they became aware that the traditional separation of art and society constituted a reactionary force. They therefore attempted to redefine the position and role of art within the overall social processes, so that it could become meaningful to them once again.

They were both positively disposed towards art as such, meaning, as there was no other strong and coherent art tradition to feel positive about, that they were sympathizing with a considerable portion of the bourgeois/white art tradition. In other words, they had felt the remarkable powers of good art themselves, and they had realized that such powers should not be wasted in stilted "Feinschmeckerei."

They were not hostile to art; as we shall see later on, that was the position of certain younger black aestheticians. In Europe we also find certain artists and critics who are very critical of traditional art; among them Bertolt Brecht.

On the whole the Harlem Renaissance was very traditional and conventional. A white aesthetic tradition was put to good use by the black artists and critics, but this tradition itself was rarely questioned. The political protest which, after all, was one of the results of the Harlem Renaissance came out in spite of rather than because of the white aesthetics: it simply was impossible to be black in the U.S.A. and not be political, in the sense that one wished to rebel against a racist system. This urge to fight against an unjust social order had to manifest itself in some form in the creative efforts of the black artists. If it had not, they would simply not have been <u>true to themselves</u>, to use a high ground phrase.

Protest and anger had never been the prescribed elements

of a Euro-American art tradition. And the general attitude to these elements from white America was, and still is, that they do not belong in true art. From the time of the Harlem Renaissance and up till now black art has been viewed as propagandistic, biased, purposeful, sociological, etc. In short, it has been judged non-universal: the art of the black folk could not have any relevance to white America if it dealt only with the black world.

The universality clause in white aesthetics which has always been a cloak for white ethnocentricity has been used to denounce black art again and again over the years based on the above reasons. However, white authors could make protests and be specific in their social references without being robbed of the prestigeous universality stamp of approval. It would not make any sense to give any examples of such literary works; all literature comes from a specific social context and all authors, in some way, make protests in their works. What white critics did not want was blackness: the black people, their language, myths, traditions, and, of course, black protest, which formed the basic material of the black art.

Hoyt W. Fuller writes:

> In a review of Gwendolyn Brooks' Selected Poems in the old New York Herald Tribune Book Week back in October 1963, poet Louis Simpson began by writing that the Chicago poet's book of poems "contains some lively pictures of Negro life," an ambiguous enough opener which did not necessarily suggest a literary putdown. But Mr. Simpson's next sentence dispelled all ambiguity. "I am not sure it is possible for a

> Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro," he wrote, "On the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important...."
>
> To most white readers, no doubt, Mr. Simpson's words...seemed eminently sensible; but it is all but impossible to imagine a black reader not reacting to the words with unalloyed fury.
>
> Both black and white readers are likely to go to the core of Mr. Simpson's statement, which is: "if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important"..."Certainly," the argument might proceed, "to be important, writing must have universal values, universal implications; it cannot deal exclusively with Negro problems." The plain but unstated assumption being, of course, that there are no "universal values" and no "universal implications" in Negro life.[13]

Or I could go back to 1926 to find a similar critical and penetrating observation; this time made by Langston Hughes:

> One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, " would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.[14]

The above quotation comes from an article which Hughes called The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain. The "racial mountain" alludes to the problem which black artists confront when their wish to merge with the (white) American way of life is being obstructed by their racial identity. Langston Hughes' solution is that the black artist should stop being

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[13]Hoyt W. Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," in Addison Gayle, Jr., The Black Aesthetic, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

[14]Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in Addison Gayle, Jr. (ed.), Black Expression (New York: Weibright and Talley, 1969), p. 258.

the peculiarly black ways of life--or rather, the peculiarities of black life. In his plays, poems, and novels he draws heavily on black folk material; and it is for this that he is mostly known today. But there is another side to him. In the 30s he wrote some extremely radical poems, which bear witness to the fact that he had adopted a Marxist way of perceiving the world.[16]

Some of these poems are one-sided and propagandistic, and by the standards developed by Lukacs (or by Du Bois) they do not become art, in the true sense of the word. They simply are not concerned with an aesthetic rendering of the outside world, they focus in on the analytical and didactical content and function of the poems. Hughes here joins hands with Brecht and the functional school.

The fascinating thing about Hughes is that he was both an extremely sensible aesthete (in the positive sense of the word), and a hard revolutionary. I find it truly interesting to see that these two aspects can be combined in the one and the same man, because precisely these two aspects seem to be mutually incompatible in most other artists. As should have appeared from my analysis of the European Marxist tradition I see these two attitudes, the aesthetic and the propagandistic, as being the two components of Marxist aesthetics, which by no means exclude each other; on the contrary

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[16]See, for instance, the collection of poems, Good Morning Revolution, edited by Faith Berry, Lawrence Hill and Co., 1973.

they ought to support each other.

That a peaceful coexistence of these two artistic attitudes within one man has only rarely been seen has obvious reasons. The delicate and meditative sensibility which is the raw material of the aesthetic reflection is easily destroyed by the harsh and direct agitation of the propagandist.

It is very typical, in this connection, that Hughes' harsher poems are written mostly in the 30s during the Depression; however, this does not apply as a rule. At all times Hughes' creative efforts are being directed by his acute political and racial consciousness, but it is being rendered in vastly different forms. Compare, for instance, the following poems:

JOHANNESBURG MINES (1928)

In the Johannesburg mines
There are 240,000 natives working.

What kind of poem
would you make of that?

240,000 natives working
In the Johannesburg mines.[17]

BLACK WORKERS (1933)

The bees work
Their work is taken from them.
We are like the bees--
But it won't last
Forever.[18]

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[17]Langston Hughes, "Johannesburg Mines," in Good Morning Revolution.

[18]Langston Hughes, "Black Workers," Ibid., p. 11.

economic system constructed to meet its own economic ends, not to improve the human conditions on Earth.

In the capitalist countries the workers joined unions (and unemployment lines) as never before; and intellectuals swarmed to join the CP's of the various countries. Eventually capitalism was saved by different kinds of reform policies (in the U.S.A. the "New Deal"), and ultimately by World War II.

The coming of the war and the "Cold War," which succeeded it, made it increasingly difficult for people with Marxist inclinations to freely propagate their beliefs. In the U.S.A. McCarthyism in the end made it, practically speaking, a very dubious matter to endorse any left wing ideas publicly. But this overt repression may not have been the worst enemy of socialism in those years; that distinction rather belongs to the economic boom, which came about as a result of the economic stimulation from the enormous war industries which, in fact, was precisely the shot in the arm the languishing patient, world capitalism, needed.

After the war the booming war industries were not shut down. Some were kept running to fabricate weapons for the Cold War rearmament, and others merely took up the production of consumer goods, which, in the end, was what created the so-called "consumer societies" of the post-war West.[20]

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[20]See for instance, William E. Leuchtenburg, A Troubled Feast (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979).

The black population of the U.S.A. also benefited from the economic welfare. However, they always lagged considerably behind their white fellow citizens. The gradual improvement in economic status in the end resulted in the demand from black Americans to become part of the American society in all respects. They were no longer content with the meager crumbs from the table of white America. They wanted to become part of the prosperous society.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and the 60s was a result of this process. The blacks centered their civil rights fight around their legal and constitutional status in an attempt to break down segregation on various levels; in schools, buses, etc. This fight against the unconstitutional segregation, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, never was a critique of the American way of life as such; on the contrary, it was a move towards participation in it. The student led civil rights movement was, characteristically, sparked by a sit-in at a lunch counter in a Woolworth department store in 1960.

It was only later that the Civil Rights Movement incorporated plain and clear "unAmerican" theories and policies in their revolutionary fighting. And at that time the inspiration was received from outside the traditional Civil Rights Movement, from Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, the Harlem Renaissance, the Negritude Movement of francophone blacks, the Cuban Revolution, and finally the end of colonial rule in Africa and the rise of independent black African states.

In 1937 Richard Wright wrote the essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing,"[21] in which he takes over from Hughes', "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Only, now the tone is harsher and more openly inspired by Marxism. On each page of this excellent aesthetic manifesto Wright documents his thorough knowledge and mastery of Marxist aesthetic theory. A heavy influence from the European school of socialist realism is evident. This is important because it is the first time that a Blackamerican constructs a coherent aesthetic theory based on Marxism, and further, acknowledges his indebtedness to it.

Wright later became more guarded in his relationship with Marxism and especially with the CPA, for reasons which I have touched upon in my introduction. In this connection I am tempted to say that this may be not only the first, but also the last time that a Blackamerican aesthetician embraces Marxism openly and without reservations. As we shall see, his successors were quick to punish him for this. The "Blueprint," nevertheless, became an enormous stimulus and touchstone for all later theories.

The essay starts out as a vehement attack on the traditional bourgeois black artists:

> Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the court of American Public Opinion

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[21]Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in Addison Gayle, Jr., The Black Aesthetic, op. cit.

The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary: a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today....

By his ability to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men, because his writing possesses the potential cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because he can insert myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life, he may expect either to be consigned to oblivion, or to be recognized for the valued agent he is.

This raises the question of the personality of the writer. It means that in the lives of Negro writers must be found those materials and experiences which will create a meaningful picture of the world today. Many young writers have grown to believe that a Marxist analysis of society presents such a picture. It creates a picture which, when placed before the eyes of the writer, should unify his personality, organize his emotions, buttress him with a tense and obdurate will to change the world.

And in turn, this changed world will dialectically change the writer. Hence, it is through a Marxist conception of reality and society that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro Writer. Further, this dramatic Marxist vision, when consciously grasped, endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other vision can give. Ultimately, it restores to the writer his lost heritage, that is, his role as a creator of the world in which he lives, and as a creator of himself.

Yet for the Negro writer, Marxism is but the starting point. No theory of life can take the place of life. After Marxism has laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones out of his will to live. He may, with disgust and revulsion, say <u>no</u> and depict the horrors of capitalism encroaching upon the human being. Or he may, with hope and passion, say <u>yes</u> and depict the faint stirrings of a new and emerging life. But in whatever social voice he chooses to speak, whether positive or negative, there should always be heard or <u>over</u>-heard his faith, his necessity, his judgment.

His vision need not be simple or rendered in primer-like terms; for the life of the Negro people is not

> simple. The presentation of their lives should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence, should be there.[23]

Wright's successors, notably Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, although they both have acknowledged their indebtedness to Wright, quickly realized that they neither could nor would endorse the aesthetic theory of socialist realism. They felt that their creative imaginations would be inadmissably hampered by dictates from any ideology. They greatly admired Wright, but, on the whole, believed that he was too "sociological" and not "aesthetic" enough. In a kind of epitaph, in which I presume Baldwin attempts to be friendly and positively disposed towards his deceased mentor, he writes:

> But now that the storm of Wright's life is over, and politics is ended forever for him...it seems to have been the tough and intuitive, the genuine Richard Wright, who was being recorded all along. It now begins to seem, for example, that Wright's unrelentingly bleak landscape was not merely that of the Deep South, or of Chicago, but that of the world, of the human heart.[24]

This together with an earlier statement, in the same essay:

> In my own relations with him, I was always exasperated by his notions of society, politics, and history, for they seemed to me utterly fanciful. I never believed that he had any real sense of how a society is put together. It had not occurred to me, and perhaps it had not occurred to him, that his major interests as well as his power lay elsewhere.[25]

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[23]Ibid., pp. 320-22.

[24]James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," in Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1975), p. 149.

[25]Ibid., p. 148.

can only be interpreted to mean that Baldwin believed that Wright, his good intentions notwithstanding, was not aware of what he was doing. He was a political romanticist who had escaped into an abstract world of Marxist thinking. He had not realized what art was all about, namely, the uncontaminated and pure aesthetic sensibility recorded.

Ellison is not afraid of telling it as he sees it either:

> How awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity. I could not and cannot question their existence, I can only seek again and again to project that humanity as I see it and feel it. To me Wright as writer was less interesting than the enigma he personified: that he could so dissociate himself from the complexity of his background while trying so hard to improve the condition of black men everywhere; that he could be so wonderful an example of human possibility but could not for ideological reasons depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself.[26]

Generally speaking, both Baldwin and Ellison criticize Wright for giving a one-sided picture of the black reality: "Protest and anger are not the only feelings produced in the breasts of Blackamericans. We are whole human beings," they claim, "with aspirations and hopes, just like everybody else living on this planet Earth." Or, as Ellison has put it himself at a banquet where he received the National Book Award for Invisible Man:

> Thus to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom

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[26]Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in Shadow and Act (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 120.

> I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction. I was to dream of a prose which was flexible and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity and individual self-realization. It would use the richness of our speech, the ideomatic expression and the rhetorical flourishes from past periods which are still alive among us. And despite my personal failures, there must be possible a fiction, which, leaving sociology to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of a fairy tale.[27]

If the putting together of these quotations gives the impression that Baldwin and Ellison are advancing an aesthetic theory which smacks of a white bourgeois aesthetic theory, it is wholly intentional. Concepts like human suffering, human aspiration, individualism, unhampered intuition and sensibility, etc. come up again and again in their critical writings. It seems, indeed, that both authors endorse a clear and unambiguous idealist notion of literature. One should, however, be extremely careful when asserting such a position; for two reasons. First, their own creative writings, to some extent, give away their aesthetic theories. And second, their protest against Richard Wright was not meant so much as a protest of what he wrote and said, but rather of the way his ideas and books were received in the white circles.

Let me exemplify the first by analyzing the creative work of Ralph Ellison, the novel Invisible Man,[28] which to

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[27]Ralph Ellison's acceptance speech, National Book Award 1952; excerpt quoted in Barbara Christian, "Ralph Ellison: A Critical Study," in Black Expression, op. cit., pp. 353-54.

[28]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, op. cit.

this day is his only major literary creation. This novel may on the surface resemble the aesthetic theory of its author: it deals exclusively with the quest for an identity of an individual. It thus fits the model of the bourgeois bildungsroman. He further seeks to avoid any externalization of the problems, by which I mean that he rarely portrays the problems of reality in a way which may suggest a solution of the problem by means of a collective effort of the black community. Rather, he constantly internalizes the problems so that only an individual effort, on the part of the "I," can solve it. "The Brotherhood" (the CPA) is treated as a bunch of very theoretical and scientific whites who have all but ceased to live and feel like human beings. (His attack on the CPA is very strong, but hardly any stronger than Wright's in Native Son.)

The hibernation theme at the end, resulting from a race riot, also underscores the recurrent theme of individuality. The great upsurge of the masses is definitely portrayed as a very futile endeavor. And at the very end of the novel, in the Epilogue, the great theme of universal human aspiration is sounded as if to make sure that this is not merely a book by a "Negro writer":

> Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?[29]

meaning, "this may be a story with black characters, but below the surface of things I have been dealing with universal human

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[29]Ibid., p. 469.

problems."

Now, fortunately the book contains far more than this. In effect the book, Ellison's aesthetic notions notwithstanding, is an excellent work of art. It by far reaches beyond what he, at various times, has claimed that true art should be. The book goes deep into the culture and mythology of Blackamerica. In fact, it is as black as it can be. Ellison's attempts to force it into being a "universal" book has luckily been unsuccessful.

Why has it been unsuccessful in becoming a "universal" piece of art? Simply because the idealistic notion of universality does not have any foundation in the real world. To talk of human aspirations, human suffering, etc., is indeed an abstraction from reality: no human struggle has ever been fought without a concrete social reality as its point of departure. Any attempt to establish the heavenly ancestor to all human life on Earth must be discredited from the beginning. Not so much because the concept of universality is dangerous in itself--at worst it is merely empty; to wrestle with it would be to wrestle with a cripple[30]--but because it connotes a whole range of bourgeois attitudes to literature.

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[30]This merciless comment was given to me by Dr. David Dorsey, Atlanta University, in a paper in which I had attempted strenuously to refute the universality concept in literature. My attempt to refute it was occasioned by my empirical observation that everywhere it seemed to be propping up white ethnocentricity. I attempted to cleanse the concept; I really should have rejected it.

Ellison believes that he is writing without a purpose, without an ideological guidance. Such elements, he claims, belong in the social sciences, not in art. So far he is partly right; scientific and aesthetic reflection (cf. Lukacs) are different things. But when he endorses the value-free universality dogma and individualism of the bourgeois aesthetic tradition he has sold out all of his credibility--had he not written a truly good book, that is.

But what does one do about a writer who claims to be doing one thing while denouncing his own theory in practice? Lukacs writes,

> But what is the situation with artists who are sincerely and deeply convinced that they do nothing but give a truthful representation of reality, do not put any restraints on their imagination, do nothing but express their personality quite openly, etc., and who refuse to make a conscious choice as to the acceptability or inacceptability of their subject matter? We already have the answer to this...: <u>if they really create aesthetically, then they are deceiving themselves</u>. The simple fact that any aesthetic reproduction of reality is wholly and totally saturated with emotions--and this not even as in the every-day life, in which there are given objects which exist independently from the human consciousness, whose subjective reception is accompanied by emotions--must prove this. This emotionality, on the contrary, represents a necessary constituting element in the aesthetic creation of the artifact in its actual-and-not-different-being (sic). Any love-poem has been written for (or against) a woman (or a man), any landscape has as its cohesive keynote a certain feeling, in which--often in a very complicated way, it must be understood--an accepting or rejecting attitude to reality, to certain active tendencies in it, is being expressed. (my underlining)[31]

The second reason that I believe one should be careful when endorsing a too facile rejection of the aesthetic theory

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[31]Georg Lukacs, <u>Partiskhed</u>, op. cit., p. 238.

of Baldwin and Ellison is that the situation from which their critical writings came out is not quite as simple as it may appear. For there are more participants in the discussion than just the three black writers: an Irving Howe, who defends Richard Wright, and a Robert Bone, who defends Baldwin and Ellison, to mention just two exponents of the ever present white critical audience.[32]

The participation of these two white critics very clearly reveals that the clash between Wright and Baldwin has other sides to it than is at once perceivable by whites. This, ironically, is documented by the well-meaning whites themselves in their respective defensive articles.

Howe steps right into the almost traditional role of the condescending white radical (cf. Jack in Invisible Man) and draws forth all the sides he likes about Wright and those he abhors in Baldwin and Ellison. One all too clearly senses the preconceived opinion of what literature should be, which Howe has found to be supported in the former and not in the latter. I almost agree with Ellison's rebuttal:

> It would seem...that he [Howe] approves of angry Negro writers only until one questions his ideas; then he reaches for his honor, cries "misrepresentation" and "distortion," and charges the writer with being both out of control of himself and with fashioning a "strategy calculated to appeal, ready-

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[32]See Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in Dissent, Autumn, 1963; Ralph Ellison, The World and the Jug, op. cit.; Robert Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of Imagination," in Modern Black Novelists, ed. by M. G. Cooke (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971).

made, to the preconceptions of the liberal audience.[33]

The same is true of Bone. In a very eloquent defense of the seemingly "pure art" and "universality" based writings of Ellison, which should be the same as white literature of the same inclindations, he succeeds in doing Ellison a downright disservice, a disservice which, on the other hand, Ellison could have turned around to become a service. In the belief that Ellison really means universality, in the accepted (white) meaning of the word, when he uses it Bone naively constructs two examples which I shall quote in their entirety:

> Let me begin with a parable. Imagine a Negro writer in the late nineteen-fifties (I choose the period advisedly, for Howe describes it as a conservative decade) attempting to decide on a subject for a novel. He has before him two projects, each based on the life of a Dodger baseball hero. The one--call it the Jackie Robinson story--is alive with racial drama: the first Negro ballplayer to make the big time; the insults from the stands, the spikings by opposing players, the mixed reception from his teammates. The other--call it the Roy Campanella story--concerns an athlete who, at the height of his career, spun his car around a curve one icy morning and spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. Within a year or two his wife divorced him, she too a victim of her human frailty.
>
> Suppose, for the purposes of argument, that our writer chose to tell the second story. Would that choice suggest to Howe that he was running from reality, the reality of the sharpened spikes? Or is it possible that the Campanella story also contains a reality sufficiently sharp? Nor is there a refusal to confront injustice, for the theme of the second story would have to be injustice on a cosmic scale.[34]

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[33]Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," pp. 120-21.

[34]Robert Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of Imagination," p. 57.

I shall refrain from commenting on the rather typical choice of examples of a bourgeois aesthetician, which in itself tells us a good deal about Bone's world picture and aesthetic theory; I shall concentrate on the racial/universal aspects. The questions in the last paragraph, obviously, are expected to be answered with "No" and "Yes" respectively. That is the normal way of dismissing racial, socialist, or any other minority literature in the U.S.A.: "we all know that it is not a matter of this or that race or group of people, but of the injustice on the cosmic scale," (Bone's idealistic background could hardly be more explicit) which means, behind the attractive facade, that it is a matter of whiteness, of white values (cf. Hoyt W. Fuller).

Neither Ellison nor Baldwin would for a moment have "forgotten" whether the character of their "novel" was black or white. They would never have excluded the acute awareness of white oppression as a factor of Negro life. I think it is safe to say that their writings fully support such an assertion. And even if one of the two writers had written the last "novel" about Roy Campanella with no explicit racial signifiers, they would certainly have thrust all their imaginative efforts into that little word "icy" in order to recreate one of the archetypes of Blackamerican culture: the cold and treacherous "whitey."

Baldwin and Ellison do not disagree so much with Wright as their white colleagues would have us believe; they are

probably more in tune with Wright than with the white critics themselves. The only palpable explanation of this confusion is that Baldwin and Ellison really do believe in the idealistic universality dogma which, they know very well they have gotten from the Euro-American aesthetic tradition, but which they, nevertheless, do not believe their white "friends" to be the true exponents of. When the white critics apply their alleged value-free aesthetic theory their white values are simply too apparent.

I would say that the black values of Baldwin and Ellison are also too apparent and that they might as well forget the whole thing about universality; the thing simply does not exist! However, one can understand their bitter fight against the stereotypical picture which is so easy to ram down the throats of Blackamericans after having read novels like Native Son, the stereotype of the angry black man who knows nothing of "love and hope for a better future." But who is it that creates such a stereotype? Certainly not the blacks themselves; rather the ignorant whites who cannot fathom the peculiarly black aspirations and feelings in the blues, the spirituals, the folklore/streetlore and myths of Blackamerica. The following quotation could have been aimed at both Baldwin and Ellison.

> It was...in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigeneous and complete expression. Blues spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, to confidential

> wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns--all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed.
>
> One would have thought that Negro writers in the last century of striving at expression would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication between them and their people. But the illusion that they could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of their race swung Negro writers away from any such path. Two separate cultures sprang up: one for the Negro masses, unwritten and unrecognized; and the other for the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered.[35]

The terrible mistake of Baldwin and Ellison is that they have attempted to "outwhite" their white colleagues in the area of idealistic aesthetics--just like Dr. Martin Luther King and a whole black Christian tradition before him have tried to "outChristian" their clearly un-Christian white oppressors. The sad thing about it is that they have not realized that it was themselves who were fooled in the end--they had been wrestling with a cripple all along.

It seems that Ellison has not paid any heed to the advice offered to him by a creature of his own imagination: the insane vet in Invisible Man who says to the narrator:

> Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe in it.[36]

Maybe he is playing a game? Who knows? Let me make a very cautious withdrawal from this discussion with a quotation from one of Baldwin's essays:

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[35]Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," pp. 317-18.

[36]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 127.

> One Negro meeting another at an all white cocktail party...cannot but wonder how the other got there. The question is: Is he for real? or is he kissing ass? Almost all Negroes...are almost always acting, but before a white audience--which is quite incapable of judging their performance.[39]

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[37]James Baldwin, "Alas, Poor Richard," p. 162.

CHAPTER IV

THE "BLACK AESTHETIC"

Generally speaking, the time between the Harlem Renaissance and the "new renaissance," the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, was dominated by the rather conservative heritage from the Harlem Renaissance mainstream, with the radical (Marxist) trends more in the background. Especially after World War II there was a very broad support behind a tempered and moderate aesthetic line. As the promise of integration into the American mainstream seemed to have come within reach, the thrust in the field of black aesthetics towards a milder and more "humane" tone became obvious. Exponents of this line are, among others, James Baldwin, Arthur P. Davis, Ralph Ellison, and Blyden Jackson.

> ...one realizes that, roughly speaking, up to 1950 the protest tradition was in full bloom, and that most of our best writers were still using it. And then with startling swiftness came this awareness of a radical change in the nation's climate; and with it the realization that the old protest themes had to be abandoned. The new climate tended to date the Problem world of the 'Forties as definitely as time had dated the New Negro "lynching-passing" literature of the 'Twenties and 'Thirties. In other words, protest writing has become the first casualty of the new racial climate.[1]

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[1]Arthur P. Davis, "Integration and Race Literature," in Phylon 17 (1956), pp. 142-43.

Undoubtedly, the 50s and the 60s were good years for black assimilation into the white middle class. The Civil Rights Movement won several battles against white racism; never before did so many blacks enter into the educational institutions of the U.S.A.; and the general welfare (usually represented by a car or a TV-set) was felt even in the midst of the bleakest ghetto.

But whereas such progress certainly meant an improvement in the living standards of Blackamerica it also threw into relief the gulf separating blacks from whites in a material sense. Blacks prosperred from the boom of Western capitalism as did everybody else, but the gap between them and their white countrymen became wider rather than narrower, a fact which did not escape the broad masses of Blackamericans, in part owing to the influence of the aforementioned TV-set.

This bias played an important role in the gradual transformation of the Civil Rights Movement from an extremely peaceful and non-violent movement to a more direct and radical one, which came to be identified with such organizations as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panthers, and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM).

If one takes the Greensboro Sit-In in 1960 as a precursor of the radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement, and then goes on to assert that the direct action/self defense and also black nationalism propagated by the young

radicals were totally new departures on the Blackamerican scene, then one has made an utterly wrong conclusion. Black nationalism is probably as old as the history of blacks in America, and violent rebellion against the white hegemony has been an ever present companion of this nationalism. The well-documented slave rebellions of the 18th and 19th centuries must give proof to this. And in the 20th century we find several exponents of black anger and black nationalism. The best examples are probably those of Marcus Garvey and the Black Muslims; but also the more peaceful religious sects led by such men as Father Divine, Daddy Grace, and Elder Lightfoot Micheaux represent a strong nationalistic tradition within Blackamerica. Not to mention the fact that the black community forms a nation within a nation as it is, because of the basic segregated nature of the U.S.A.

So, when the young militants took up direct action, self defense and nationalism they merely rediscovered an old tradition.

The truly new thing about the black protest of the 1950s and 1960s was neither anger nor nationalism but rather the factual progress which was made into the American mainstream, and the promise of social equality which this move seemed to make probable. It was in the spirit of this progress that blacks and whites could march and organize together in the 50s and early 60s, and it was the rediscovery of the black nationalistic tradition, or rather the rediscovery of the

necessity of it, which made interracial cooperation more and more difficult throughout the 60s.

As long as black protest was aimed at deficiencies in and maladjustment of an otherwise faultless American system blacks and whites could easily march arm in arm; but as soon as the black protestors started to shoot at the basic construction of this system ruptures were bound to occur. By 1964, a strong nationalistic trend had developed within the Civil Rights Movement, which no longer accepted compromises and gradual progress in their political platforms. Strongly influenced by the teachings of the Black Muslims and especially the charismatic leader Malcolm X on the one hand, and by the increasing problems which the integrationalist Civil Rights Movement met with, as it gradually realized that the problems of Blackamerica could not be solved merely by reform policies on the other, the call for a more radical line became stronger and stronger. By 1966 the slogan Black Power was widely used. Stokely Carmichael, then chairman of the SNCC, in a public speech could say:

> The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is black power....Ain't nothin' wrong with anything all black 'cause I'm black and I'm all good. Now don't you be afraid. And from now on when they ask you what you want, you know what to tell them...Black power! Black power! Black power.[2]

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[2]Stokely Carmichael, quoted in Black Protest in the Sixties, ed. by August Meier and Elliot Rudwick (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 19.

Black Power, Black Consciousness, Black Pride, and Black Is Beautiful gradually became accepted slogans in the black community, and they marked a definite shift in strategy from the earlier integration policies. Among the younger black activists and especially among students a Marxist rhetoric also became more and more commonplace. As we shall see, a nationalistic, Marxist line was to gain immense influence.

It is hard to say how much of this "high ground" rhetoric and ideological material seeped through to the ordinary ghetto dweller or to the Southern rural blacks--not very much in its original form and meaning, it would be safe to say--but that is beside the point. The point is that the impact of a strong and direct pride in being black was felt on all levels of Blackamerica. And this leads me back to my analysis of the black aesthetics.

The young black aestheticians did not invent Black Pride and Black Beauty; they merely explained and clarified the new feeling in the black community, and hoped that they would thereby contribute cultural and ideological angles which would support the general revolutionary fight. They perceived of themselves as cultural revolutionaries whose weapon, to use a trite phrase, was the pen rather than the gun or the picket line. The opening line in Hoyt W. Fuller's influential essay, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," thus confidentially announces, "The black revolt is as palpable in

letters as it is in the streets."[3] And, indeed, in the 1960s black art and art criticism flourished as never before. It was truly a "new renaissance."

The renaissance of the 60s was a renaissance in the true sense of the word since hardly any new theories were advanced; they were almost all old acquaintances which were merely dressed up in a contemporary terminology. This may sound as a gross depreciation of the Black Arts Movement, but it is not meant that way. The "new renaissance" was characterized by other qualities than the purely innovative; first and foremost it was a popular movement, in the original sense of the word. Whereas the Harlem Renaissance was almost exclusively a middle class phenomenon, the Black Arts Movement had a true base in the black folk.

For the first time in the history of Blackamerica it became possible for black artists to write exclusively for a black audience. They did not have to consider how this or that would be received by the white public; they could concentrate on their own people. And they did. Never before had the black folk culture been so extensively utilized and scrutinized by black artists. The accepted standards from white society were bluntly rejected and instead the blues, jazz, ghetto jargon, black folk mythology and other peculiarly black cultural elements were inserted in the gap which the

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[3]H. W. Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. by Addison Gayle, Jr., op. cit., p. 3.

rejected white aesthetic had left open.

This contains the duality of the black cultural revolution of the 60s. It was both a rejection of an evil dog-eat-dog capitalist system and it was a replacement of these foul materialist qualities by essentially humanistic values represented by the black folk culture. Margaret Walker in 1970 clearly pointed out this duality of the black aesthetic:

> The black writer...has a heritage of fighting for freedom, for the liberation of mind and spirit from the hideous bondage of racism and all the shackles of fearful prejudice. We have a rich gift for America, but it is a spiritual gift; and the materialists can neither understand and accept, nor benefit from such a gift....
>
> Afro-Americans know why the quality of life in America has gone sour. It is because her values are based on money and industry. It is because racism, militarism, materialism, and financial imperialism have gained a stranglehold on this society like an octopus, and they are squeezing the life out of this nation before our very eyes.[4]

One clearly hears the echoes from The Souls of Black Folk, in which Du Bois in 1903 put the very same sentiments as follows:

> We the darker ones come even now not altogether emptyhanded: there are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness.[5]

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[4]Margaret Walker, "The Humanistic Tradition of Afro-American Literature," in American Libraries 1, October 1970, p. 853.

[5]W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, op. cit., p. 220.

Although Du Bois' characterization of the American society as a "dusty desert of dollars and smartness," in its own way comes pretty close to pointing out the basic economic forces of American capitalism it is especially in the field of economic and political analysis that the new aestheticians had really progressed. Their analytical apparatus had been considerably improved over the years, and they were much more precise in their critique of the white society. They were aided primarily by an increased familiarity with Marxism.

Whereas Richard Wright had stood almost alone when he propagated his Marxist beliefs in the 30s and 40s the young aestheticians could be sure that they would be understood by a broad segment of black people who were in tune with their Marxist doctrines. The young aestheticians themselves were greatly inspired by "practical" revolutionaries and trained Marxists like Robert F. Williams and Angela Davis; and, of course, by the more or less Marxist inclined political organizations, the Black Panthers, SNCC, CORE, and RAM; although the relationship between the so-called practical revolutionaries and the cultural revolutionaries was not always the very best.[6]

On the whole the political and cultural milieu of the 60s was much more amenable to Marxism. One of the reasons for this was, undoubtedly, the radicalization of the white

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[6]Angela Davis in her autobiography, With My Mind of Freedom (Bantam Books, 1975) shortly denounces the cultural revolutionaries saying, "...LeRoi Jones and Ron Karenga and the whole lot of cowardly cultural nationalists...."

middle class youth. The two movements, the black cultural revolution and the white student rebellion, must not be confused with each other, but in certain areas they were quite in line, notably in their denouncement of the Vietnam War, and their rejection of empty middle class values. All in all this critical attitude towards the general outlook of the American society resulted in a renewed interest for Marxism.

On the basis of this "Marxist renaissance" it became possible to develop and improve the heritage from Du Bois, Hughes, and Wright; people like Addison Gayle, Jr., Hoyt W. Fuller, Larry Neal, Ron Karenga, Don L. Lee, W. Keorapetse Kgositsile, Carolyn F. Gerald (Fowler), LeRoi Jones, and many others, although they represent different attitudes to aesthetic matters, helped create a distinct and very articulate black aesthetic theory.

The Black Aesthetic marked the height of the Black-american aesthetic tradition. In Marxist terms, the basic difference in the aesthetic theory of the various members of the Black Arts Movement lay in their attitude to <u>the function</u> of art. Should it be seen as primarily a social and political weapon, or should it be seen as a specific mode of human reflection which is essentially alien to political and social reasoning (although not without influence on that)? Again we see the traditional dichotomy in Marxist aesthetics between a functional (Brecht) and a methodical (Lukacs) school. It is safe to say that the functional school was the most influential in the heyday of the cultural battles of the 60s.

A positive and affirmative picture of Blackamerica was an imperative in almost all the aesthetic theories which were advanced. If a piece of art did not represent the black culture as strong and healthy, and at the same time did not represent white America as hell on earth (cf. LeRoi Jones', The System of Dante's Hell),[7] then that specific piece of art had not fulfilled its potential function. Brecht's insistence on a "correct" analysis corresponds to this prescription of the black aestheticians of the 60s.

One of the most militant exponents of this functional aesthetic line was Ron Karenga; he writes:

> Black art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution.
>
> It must become and remain a part of the revolutionary machinery that moves us to change quickly and creatively. We have always said, and continue to say, that the battle we are waging now is the battle for the minds of Black people, and that if we lose this battle, we cannot win the violent one. It becomes very important then, that art plays the role it should play in Black survival and not bog itself down in the meaningless madness of the Western world wasted....
>
> For all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid.[8]

Karenga has no sympathy for the aesthetic form of a piece of art. Or as he says himself in the above article: he neither has "time [n]or will"[9] to go into a discussion of

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[7]LeRoi Jones, The System of Dante's Hell (New York: Grove Press, 1966).

[8]Ron Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. by Addison Gayle, Jr., op. cit., p. 31.

[9]Ibid., p. 31.

the artistic level, since the social level of art must absorb all our energies.

Karenga is a good example of the radical wing of the Black Arts Movement. He is certainly committed to a cultural fight, and I have no reason to believe that he was not sincere; however, some of his ideas, to me, seem to be too much on the combative side. It seems that he all but loses his sensitivity to the positive side of black cultural forms, which exist and flourish in the face of white oppression. He believes that all black cultural forms coming out of the U.S.A. are invalid because they are contaminated by the "madness of the Western world":

> Therefore, we say the blues are invalid; for they teach resignation, in a word acceptance of reality --and we have come to change reality. We will not submit to the resignation of our fathers who lost their money, their women, and their lives and sat around wondering "what did they do to be so black and blue."[10]

It seems to me that Karenga throws out the baby with the bathwater in being much too categoric and dogmatic. The exact opposite sentiment with regard to the blues is expressed by the certainly no less devoted cultural revolutionary LeRoi Jones. In an article praising black music in general and James Brown in particular, the latter is taken to represent the oldest, strongest, and most life-giving element in black music; and he, James Brown, comes right out of the blues tradition:

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[10]Ibid., p. 36.

> Form and content are both mutually expressive of the whole. And they are both equally expressive...each have an identifying motif and function. In Black music, both identify place and direction. We want different contents and different forms because we are different peoples.
>
> James Brown's form and content identify an entire group of people in America. However these may be transmuted and reused, reappear in other areas, in other musics for different purposes in the society, the initial energy and image are about a specific grouping of people, Black People.
>
> Music makes an image. What image? What environment (in that word's most extended meaning, i.e., total, external and internal, environment)? I mean there is a world powered by that image. The world James Brown's images power is the lowest placement (the most alien) in the white American social order. Therefore, it is the Blackest and potentially the strongest. (my underlining)[11]

When it came to destroying white aesthetic forms, however, Jones was an expert. He deliberately smashed the forms of transmitted white bourgeois art forms wherever he found them; whether in poetry, novels, music, and in plays. I have already mentioned his iconoclastic novel The System of Dante's Hell; other examples would be the plays Dutchman[12] and The Toilet,[13] in which he takes up controversial subjects and motifs in order to shock and frighten his audience. A close similarity to the demythologizing and alienating (Verfremdung) techniques of Brecht is apparent. Later on in his development his iconoclastic tendencies become more marked and he

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[11]LeRoi Jones, "The Changing Same (R & B and New Black Music)," in Black Music (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1967), pp. 185-86.

[12]LeRoi Jones, Dutchman (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1964).

[13]LeRoi Jones, The Toilet (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

appears to endorse the highly militant stance of a Ron Karenga. In the following poem, published in 1966, we find an extremely angry and violent LeRoi Jones:

> Poems are bullshit unless they are
> teeth or trees or lemons piled
> on a step. Or black ladies dying
> of men leaving nickel hearts
> beating them down. Fuck poems
> and they are useful, they shoot
> come out at you, love what you are,
> breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
> strangely after pissing. We want live
> words of the hip world live flesh &
> coursing blood. Hearts Brains
> Souls splintering fire. We want poems
> like fists beating niggers out of Jocks
> or dagger poems in the slimy bellies
> of the owner-jews. Black poems to
> smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches
> whose brains are red jelly stuck
> between 'lizabeth taylor's toes. Stinking
> Whores! We want "poems that kill."
> Assassin poems. Poems that shoot
> guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
> and take their weapons leaving them dead
> with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
> poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite
> politicians Airplane poems. rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
> rrrrrrrrrrrrrr....tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh
> ....rrrrrrrrrrrrrr....Setting fire and death to
> whities ass. Look at the Liberal
> Spokesman for the jews clutch his throat
> & puke himself into eternity....rrrrrrrrrr
> There's a negroleader pinned to
> a bar stool in Sardi's eyeballs melting
> in hot flame. Another negroleader
> on the steps of the white house one
> kneeling between the sherif's thighs
> negotiating cooly for his people.
> Aggh....stumbles across the room...
> Put it on him, poem. Strip him naked
> to the world! Another bad poem cracking
> steel knuckles in a jewlady's mouth
> Poem scream poison gas on beasts in green berets
> Clean out the world for virtue and love,
> Let there be no love poems written
> until love can exist freely and
> cleanly. Let Black People understand
> that they are the lovers and the sons

of lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors. Are poems & poets &
all the loveliness in the world

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently

or LOUD[14]

At first glance this poem seems to be nothing but iconoclastic, a smashing of images and of a literary form. That is the way most whites would interpret it, anyway. And Jones wanted whites to understand it in that way--and if they even got scared he would feel truly successful. A lot of times one finds the young black artists deliberately stepping into a stereotype created by white America, simply because they want to frighten the whites.

...
We are unfair, and unfair.
We are black magicians, black art
s we make in black labs of the heart.

The fair are
fair, and death
ly white.

The day will not save them
and we own
the night.[15]

However, at second glance--and the white reader has to look twice in order to understand this--one finds that this

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[14]LeRoi Jones, "Black Art," in Black Fire, ed. by LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1976) (1968).

[15]From LeRoi Jones, "State/Ment," in Afro-American Writing, Vol. II, ed. by Richard A. Long and Eugenia W. Collier, p. 697.

seemingly image-negative new poetry was inspired by the street-lore/jive tradition of the black ghettoes. It was, in fact, an affirmation of a black aesthetic while at the same time a denouncement/destruction of a white. The young black poets merely went around the white aesthetic and gave it a broadside from the depths of the black aesthetic.

Highly militant art abounded in Blackamerica, but in the field of aesthetics the black cultural revolutionaries sorely lacked a contemporary and effective theory, which could explain in depth what was going on in the arts. Du Bois, Hughes, and Wright were all rediscovered and used extensively, but none of their writings could be used directly by the new black critics to address the ongoing cultural battle. The aesthetic theory of an Ellison or of a Baldwin could, evidently, not cope with the problems of the times.

As the 60s progressed, rudiments of an effective black aesthetic theory started to appear. In the field of music LeRoi Jones had made impressive advances towards a redefinition of white music aesthetics,[16] but the literary arts still lacked a "bullet proof" manifesto; a new Blueprint was sorely needed. At the Black Power Conference of 1968 Carolyn F. Gerald (now Fowler) presented a short, but very diligent and tight article, "The Black Writer and His Role."[17] I have already

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[16]See his Blues People (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1963), and Black Music, op. cit.

[17]In the Black Aesthetic, ed. by Addison Gayle, Jr., op. cit.

quoted from this very influential article, so I need not make any further presentation of it. Suffice it to say that it was a godsend when it appeared.

Now that the dust has settled one may begin to see more clearly the contours of the more deep and reposeful aesthetic theories of the 60s. The late 60s and the early 70s indicated that a shift from an angry, emotional and highly militant art theory to a more analytical one was in the making. And the 70s have, up till now, fully supported this thesis. The theoretical chaos which ensued from the heated and clamorous discussions of the 60s has been carefully ordered and analyzed in the comparative equilibrium of the 70s.

The scholars responsible for this are, apart from Dr. C. Fowler already mentioned, the veterans Addison Gayle, Jr. and Hoyt W. Fuller, and a whole school of younger critics among whom I need to mention Stephen Henderson.[18] Magazines like the Black Scholar and First World, edited by Robert L. Allen and Hoyt W. Fuller respectively, and the scholarly cooperative Institute of the Black World, with Vincent Harding as a leading figure, all represent the dedicated efforts of some conscious black revolutionaries to carry on the cultural fight of Blackamerica on the basis of the conquests of the 60s.

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[18]See for instance, his Understanding the New Black Poetry (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973).

CONCLUSION

The black aestheticians of the 60s were often criticized for using their energies on "something as academic" as art and art theory; that, it was maintained, was not what revolution was all about. When faced with such an attitude the cultural revolutionaries would argue that a person who could claim that a black cultural fight, which sought to re-establish a positive black self-conception, was devoid of revolutionary power, did not know what he was talking about. Cultural and political fighting have always been inseparable in Blackamerica. A person who maintains that art and politics are separate things, and only the latter has the potential of changing society, has merely swallowed the bait of bourgeois aesthetics; the same bait which was swallowed, and still is being swallowed, by certain dogmatic Marxists in Europe and around the world.

If an oppressed people does not have a strong and viable culture it has no chance of winning a battle against the Establishment, in whatever form that may manifest itself. Or one could turn it around and say that if a people does not have an alternative vision of life to put in the place of the oppressive culture, then, what are the perspectives and the reasons for revolting against the evil system? Fight and

revolt in themselves can only be the means to an end. Indeed, such an attitude was shared by most of the black cultural revolutionaries, an attitude which may be termed "black humanism," but which sees all mankind as its target group:

> Freedom, peace, and human dignity are only possible in a world where common humanity supercedes race. Spiritual entities cannot be attained by materialistic measures. Man must learn to appreciate the spiritual nature and destiny of all mankind....
>
> How can man develop this new consciousness? It must be inbred and taught to our young. Children and youth today are adults tomorrow. The role of the school is superseded only by the home, and the books....Afro-American literature is a reservoir of black humanism. All America needs to become acquainted with this literature. White America still does not seem to understand that no man can enslave another man's body and save his own soul. When every human being is holy in the eyes of another, then begins the millennium. Meanwhile, prepare for Armageddon. (my underlining)[1]

The fight goes on. Even though the scholarly journals and well trimmed campus lawns breathe peace and quiet--and even that is a statement which needs modifications--the cultural fight is likely to break out again at any given time. For the black cultural revolution of the 60s was quenched and quieted in the making; the idealistic goals of Margaret Walker were never reached. And, certainly, the fulfillment of the "millennium" is as desirable today as it was ten years ago. A fitting epitaph to the cultural revolution of the 60s would be that it will not be forgotten. As was the case with its predecessor, the Harlem Renaissance, it will be taken up again

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[1]Margaret Walker, "The Humanistic Tradition of Afro-American Literature," p. 854.

and put to good use, when, at some time in the future, America is once again faced with its 400 years old dilemma; in the fire next time.

My presentation of the Blackamerican aesthetic tradition has mainly sought to trace the internal relationship between the various theoretical constructions and individual scholars. I hope to have shown that the recent Black Arts Movement neither can, nor should be seen in isolation; the new black aestheticians are heavily indebted to their older predecessors. It has also sought to show that the outlook of aesthetic theory, the theoretical direction it takes at any given time in history, to a large extent is subordinated to the general status of its social and cultural base. In less restricted terms, this is the same as saying that the black aestheticians have responded to the movements of Blackamerica as it has been carried through the ups and downs of American capitalism. Both sides need to be taken into account.

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